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Staging Beckett in Great Britain, edited by David Tucker and Trish McTighe, London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016, xxvii +258 pp., £59.50 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-4742-4017-8

As Jonathan Heron and Nicholas Johnson observed in their Introduction to the special ‘Performance Issue’ of the *Journal of Beckett Studies* (2014), Beckett’s work has traditionally been separated into “two worlds, the scholarly and the practical, but with neither wholly his own,” and it has been the task of much recent scholarship to break down such “arbitrary divisions.”¹ The ‘Performance Issue’ was a notable precursor to *Staging Beckett in Great Britain*, edited by David Tucker and Trish McTighe, which sets out to advance earlier work in the field by offering a comprehensive history of Beckett and performance in Great Britain. It is part of a wider collaborative project between the Universities of Chester and Reading, the latter of course home to its own unparalleled archive of Beckett materials, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. The project’s full title is ‘Staging Beckett: The Impact of Productions of Samuel Beckett’s Drama on Theatre Practice and Cultures in the UK and Ireland,’ and the present essay collection is partnered by a second work: *Staging Beckett in Ireland and Northern Ireland* (2016).

In their opening remarks, Tucker and McTighe identify a number of aims associated with the ‘Staging Beckett’ project that their study hopes to fulfil: among them, to consult and explicate materials in little-known archives; to assess the effects of Beckett productions on British theatre cultures; and to understand the aesthetic trends and performance practices that have evolved in stagings of Beckett’s work in the UK. They have certainly collected a group of impressive contributors, including S. E. Gontarski, David Pattie, and John Stokes. It bears mentioning that some of the theoretical groundwork for this volume has been done in an essay co-authored by Pattie, Tucker, McTighe and Anna McMullan on ‘Staging Beckett: Constructing Histories of Performance,’ which outlines Beckett’s changing status in a rapidly evolving post-war British theatre scene, and his equally complex reception in Ireland.²

Across the twelve essays in the volume there are distinctive recurring focal points. The 1955 London premiere of *Waiting for Godot* is invoked as an event seething with fraught potential for British dramatic culture, although David Pattie elegantly problematizes this characterisation of *Godot* by situating the production within the constellation of factors that enabled change in the stage industry at that moment. On the whole, however, *Godot* is all too present, discussed again in various contexts by Matthew McFrederick, John Stokes, Sos Eltis, Kene Igweonu, and Ksenija Horvat. It would perhaps have been wise to limit the space given to Beckett’s best-known play in order to generate further conversations about those dramatic works traditionally found on the peripheries of Beckett studies.

Another prominent strand running through the volume is the collaborative nature of Beckett’s dramatic productions: what Tucker and McTighe call the “lines of interrelation” connecting Beckett to specific individuals and practitioners, and thereby particular institutions (xxi). In his essay on Beckett and the Royal Court, S. E. Gontarski thoughtfully illustrates Beckett’s working relationship with George Devine, whom Beckett saw as an ally because, as he confided to Alan Schneider, he “will

always let me be in on production” (29). The extent of Beckett’s personal involvement in productions of his work dominates Part I on ‘Origins, Theatre, Directors,’ with an essay by Matthew McFrederick on Beckett’s relationship with Riverside Studios, and an excellent piece by Sos Eltis on Beckett and Peter Hall, which explores the lasting impact of this dynamic on Hall’s career, and subsequently on the history of British theatre.

Where discussions revolve around practitioners and companies, the contributors necessarily encounter issues relating to gender and embodiment, race, and the politics of local theatre productions. A number of essays attempt to assess Beckett’s reception outside of London in regional theatres, and Mark Taylor-Batty perhaps best accomplishes this in his engaging assessment of the 1993 *Happy Days* at the West Yorkshire Playhouse. Part II deals with ‘Productions, Locations, Legacies’ yet although several contributors gesture towards subjects marginalised, side-lined and elided by stagings of Beckett, there is a detectable reluctance to ask too much of the texts themselves, or to push readings of Beckett down less well-trodden avenues. In an essay on Talawa’s all-black production of *Waiting for Godot* (2012), Kene Igweonu somewhat uncritically asserts “the acknowledged universality of Beckett’s masterpiece,” but in doing so perhaps neglects the more troubling aspects of power and control in Beckett’s plays (144). Similarly, Ksenija Horvat fleetingly mentions Keith Hack’s 1971 production of *Godot*, with its homosexual reading of Vladimir and Estragon’s relationship, in her assessment of Beckett in Scotland. This constitutes the only reference to queer stagings of Beckett in the volume, and it is certainly an area that future studies of these plays in performance could address in more thorough and illuminating ways.

Scholars and practitioners have consistently confronted the extent of Beckett’s control over productions of his work and, following his death, the authority of the Beckett Estate. Derval Tubridy lucidly sketches the controversy surrounding Deborah Warner’s 1994 version *Footfalls*, and the attendant questions about women performing Beckett raised by this production, which John Stokes also reads as challenging “the traditional spatial relation between actor and audience” (81). Moreover, Graham Saunders unearths the intriguing story of *Breath’s* inclusion in Kenneth Tynan’s erotic revue *Oh! Calcutta!*, revealing a chain of ambiguous communications and speculative involvements. The other essays in the collection by Andrew Head and David Tucker explore respectively the various stagings of *Krapp’s Last Tape* in Britain, and Beckett’s influence on Harold Pinter, thematically coalescing in the image of a terminally ill Pinter performing the role of Krapp in 2006.

At the heart of *Staging Beckett* is an eagerness to pinpoint “those key moments when the avant-garde has entered the vernacular” (74). Beckett’s drama remains precariously poised between the subversive and the mainstream, and the essays in this collection offer a detailed history of productions that have differently shaped his legacy for British theatre culture. There is perhaps too great an emphasis on the canonical plays – *Godot*, *Endgame*, *Krapp’s Last Tape* – but this study retains enough nuance and flexibility to generate further enquiries into the marginalised aspects of

Beckett's work, in the knowledge that what has become so familiar can once again be made strange.

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¹ Jonathan Heron and Nicholas Johnson, "Introduction," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 23.1 (2014): 4.

² Anna McMullan, Trish McTighe, David Pattie and David Tucker, "Staging Beckett: Constructing Histories of Performance," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 23.1 (2014): 11-33.